

LUST FOR A VAMPIRE

THE HAMMER VIDEO LEGACY

PAUL ROLAND VENTURES BRAVELY INTO THE VAULTS TO TRACE THE HISTORY OF HAMMER STUDIOS, ACCOMPANIED BY FEARLESS VAMPIRE HUNTER, PETER CUSHING

The scene is the crypt of Karnstein castle, deep in the Carpathian mountains. A young girl lies helpless over a stone sarcophagus, while a distinguished but malevolent gentleman brandishes a sacrificial dagger. Seconds later, the blade flashes, blood flows and lightning illuminates the figure within the sarcophagus — it's Carmilla, the vampire, blonde, voluptuous and bathed in crimson!

These images can only belong to one genre — the horror film — and to those of Hammer Studios in particular.

Between 1957 and 1976, this small British studio revived the horror film as luridly as it did its own monsters. Redefining the genre, pumping new life into an ailing British film industry and setting both the standard and style for the archetypal horror film.

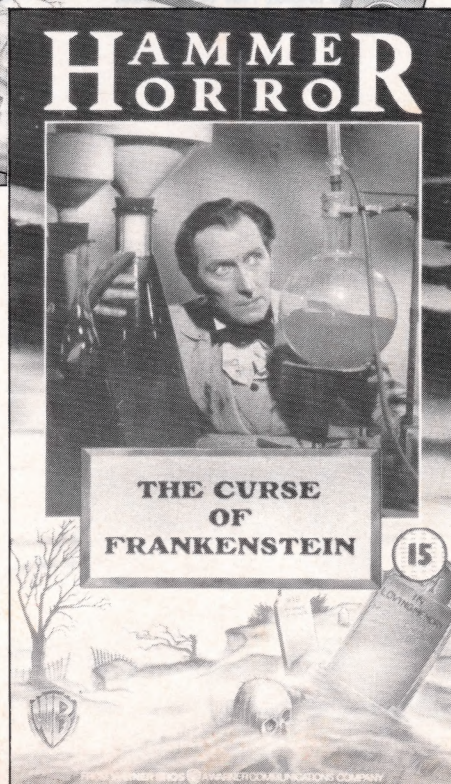
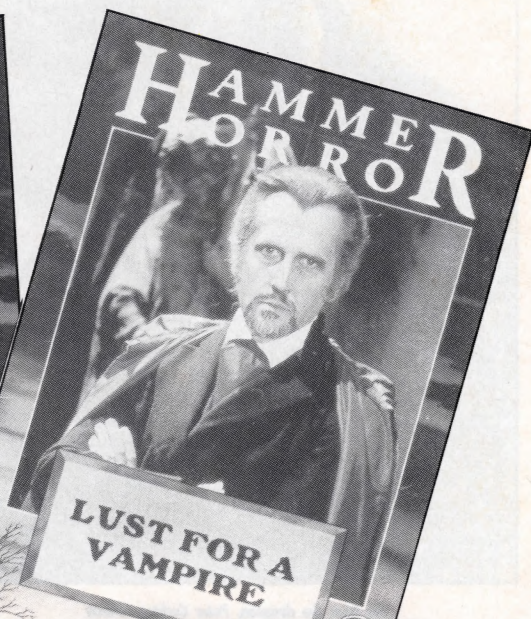
It's been argued that without the example, influence and success of Hammer, films like *The Exorcist*, *The Omen*, *Night Of The Living Dead*, *Halloween* and *Carrie* would not have been made.

The scene described above comes from *Lust For A Vampire*, one of the number of Hammer epics now released on tape by Warner Home Video. It could just as easily have come from any one of the 16 vampire pictures the studio produced during the '60s and early '70s.

The studio was based at Bray, an old manor house in large grounds by



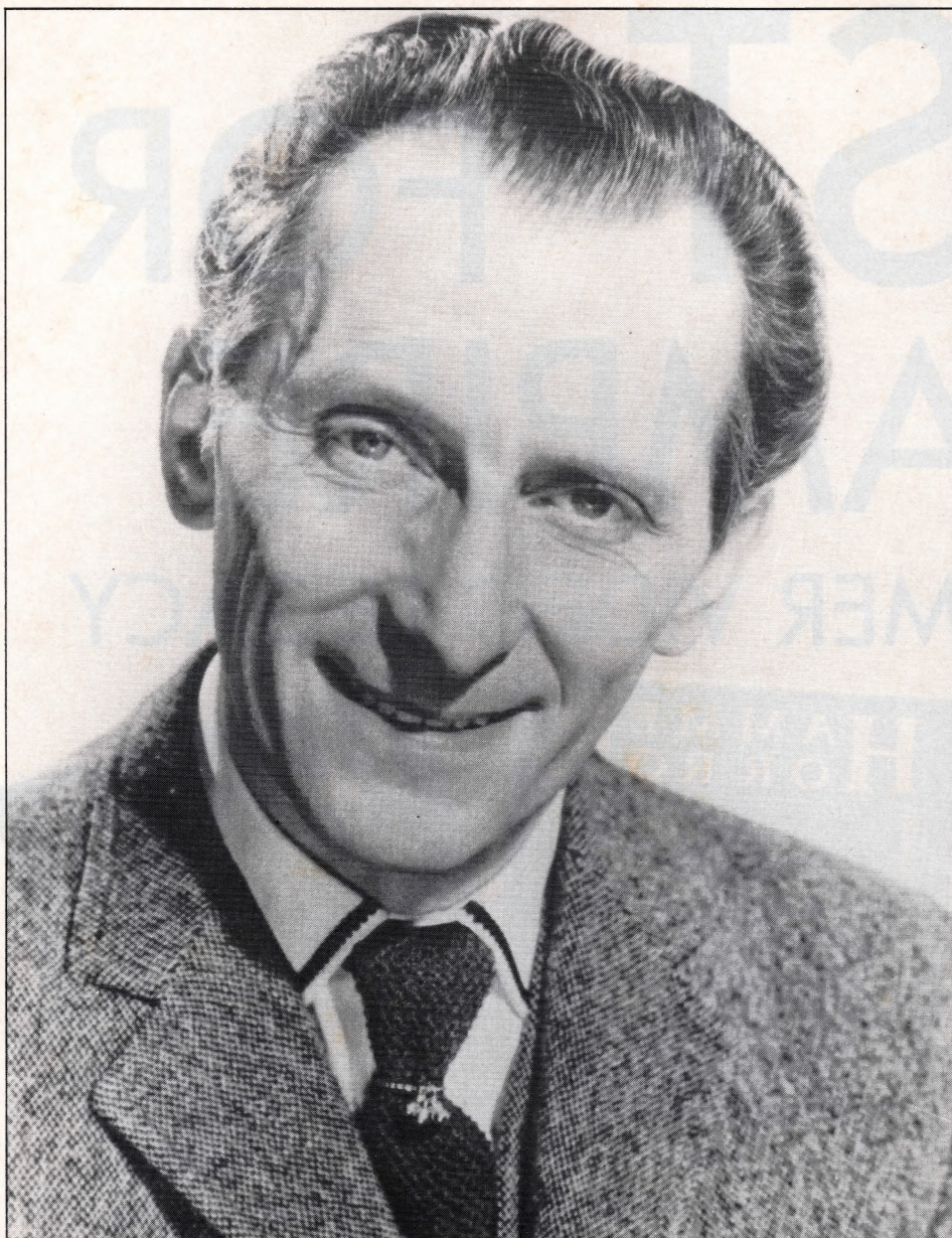
A tantalising trio of Hammer horror — films which set the pace for the more recent of the genre, like The Exorcist and Halloween.



the Thames near Maidenhead. This itself was often used as a location for the action.

Actors such as Christopher Lee, Peter Cushing and Ralph Bates featured in almost every production, together with a repertory of supporting players. A regular team behind the camera ensured continuity of quality and a recognisable Hammer style.

The art director Bernard Robinson



Far from the dungeon, Peter Cushing reflects on the character of Frankenstein.

created a stylised landscape that became instantly familiar to fans the world over, often disguising sets from previous productions to make meagre budgets stretch a little further.

Producer Anthony Hinds regularly doubled as a scriptwriter using the pen name John Elder. His stories were brought to the screen by one of three 'house' directors, Roy Ward Baker, Freddie Francis, or the late Terence Fisher.

With its first full-blooded fantasy offering *The Curse Of Frankenstein* in 1957, Hammer added an important new dimension to the horror film, one which had been lacking in the shadow-filled films of the '30s and '40s — colour.

Virtually all Hammer's films are at least visually striking, thanks to the predominance of strong primary colours. And where Universal and RKO had suggested horrors unseen on the screen, Hammer took advantage of the relaxation of censorship to show

underlying sexual elements, particularly in its vampire movies. When *The Curse Of Frankenstein* premiered, the critics were outraged.

But both cast and crew now recall the early films with affection rather than horror. Peter Cushing defends them by saying: 'The Hammer films were almost morality plays, a mixture of fairy story and melodrama. When evil was challenged by the forces of good, it was always defeated.'

'The critics were very unfair to Hammer. They condemned the films for their violence and low budgets. Yet there was more violence in the James Bond films of that era than any of the Hammer horror films I made.'

Michael Carreras, who ran the family-owned firm with his father James, and who later steered the company single-handed, recognised there was a large new audience eager for a more explicit brand of horror film in keeping with the permissive mood of the '60s. He was determined to give the public just what it wanted.

Times had changed dramatically since Universal made its *Frankenstein* series with Boris Karloff and Colin Clive. Even so, *The Curse Of Frankenstein* was a gamble for the small studio.

It had the additional disadvantage of being denied the use of the distinctive monster make-up by the copyright owners, Universal Pictures.

Hammer's make-up man, Phil Leakey, was forced to devise a different face for the creature, a ragged patchwork of scars and loosely stitched flesh.

The actor chosen to play the hapless creation was the then unknown Christopher Lee. The role of creator went to the softly spoken and gentle Englishman, Peter Cushing.

Cushing remembers: 'I'd read that Hammer was going to remake *Frankenstein* which I'd seen many years ago with Boris Karloff and Colin Clive. I thought it was a wonderful film and a wonderful part. So I told my agent this was the sort of film I'd like to do!'

Cushing believed that 'Frankenstein was not evil, but a man obsessed by what he was trying to achieve. I couldn't portray him as a do-it-yourself merchant. There had to be a reason behind his actions and I resolved to play it straight. The portrayal from start to finish had to be sincere. They were fun films to make, yet a trace of tongue in cheek would have conveyed itself to the audience.'

The Curse Of Frankenstein broke all records on its release and spawned five sequels. All starred Peter Cushing, but in none of them did he succeed in creating a man.

In *Revenge Of Frankenstein*

(1957), he transferred the brain of his hunchback assistant into the new body only to have it turn cannibal. In *The Evil Of Frankenstein* (1964), he reactivated an earlier failure with predictable results. In 1967, *Frankenstein Created Woman*.

Later, in 1969, Freddie Jones was the unlikely recipient of a mad surgeon's brain in the penultimate shocker *Frankenstein Must Be Destroyed*. In 1973, he stitched together his final failure from living donors then resident at the local madhouse in *Frankenstein And The Monster From Hell*. Still, we can't all be perfect.

'None of us realised what *Frankenstein* was going to lead to,' Cushing told *What Video*. 'It was just one picture in a group of five that Hammer was doing that year. It was a ludicrous budget — £65,000, I believe. As a budget for a film that was nonsensical. But it made a lot of money so it spent a little more on the next one, *Dracula*.'

For *Dracula*, Carreras cast Lee as the vampire count, an obvious choice considering his imposing stature, aristocratic bearing, dark European features and seductive vocal delivery. Cushing appeared as his nemesis Van Helsing.

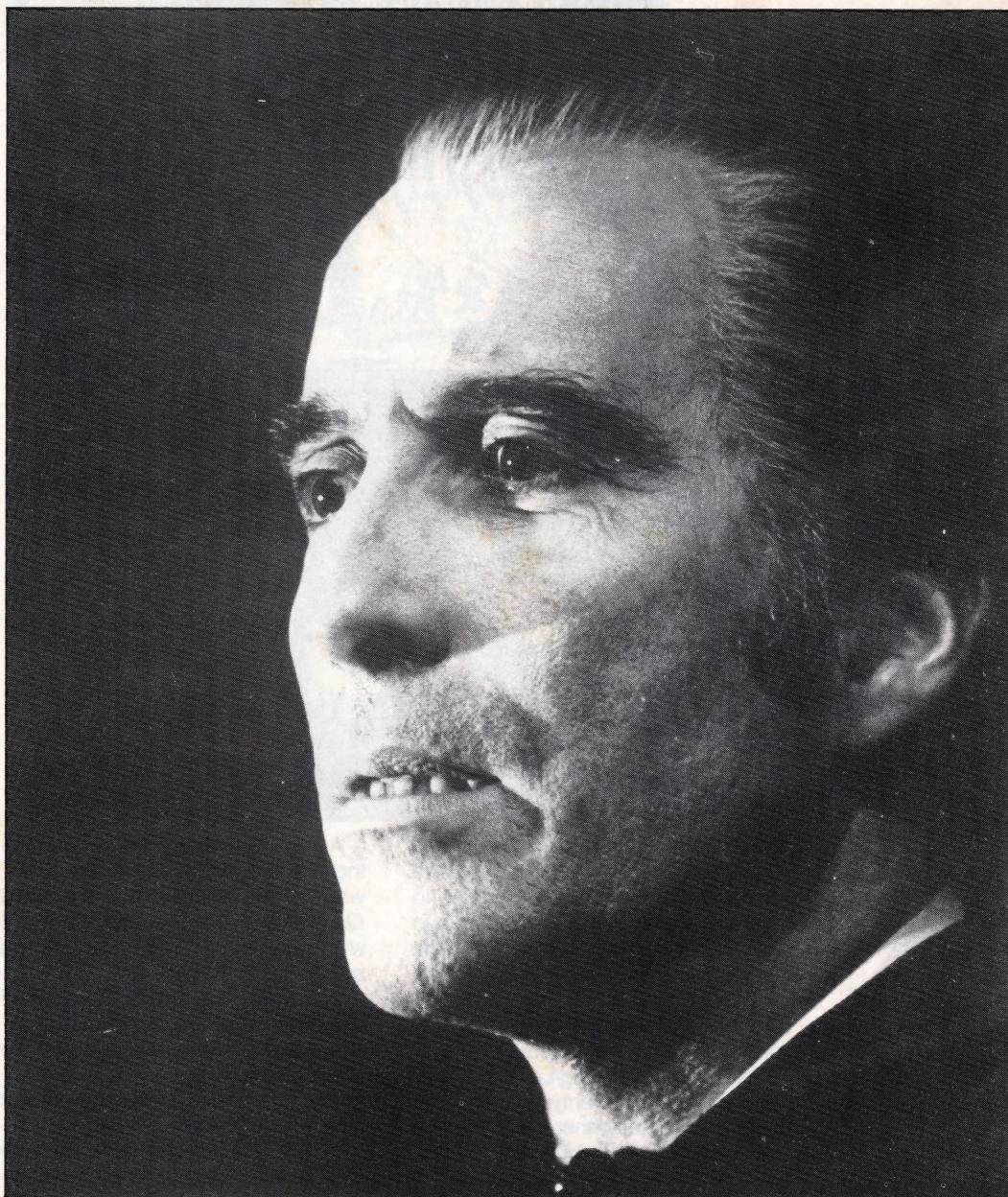
Again, the film's treatment of a classic novel was far more explicit in its depiction than in previous Hollywood versions. Director Terence Fisher drew on the novel's sexual undercurrents for additional contemporary appeal. Count Dracula's female victims welcomed the vampire's bite as they would a lover's kiss.

The original ending of the film was to have been far more conventional until Cushing suggested an alternative. 'The script called for Van Helsing to get out his crucifix and force Dracula into the sunlight. I said it would be better if I ran across a long table and leap to pull the curtains down. It was much more effective.'

Having forced the Count into the sunlight, Van Helsing watches anxiously as Dracula's body disintegrates into dust.

Effects expert Les Bowie achieved this remarkable scene by filming the disintegration backwards. He began with a small pile of dust, then after shooting a few frames, added more dust and a couple of bones. A few more frames of film were exposed, then a skull was added with shreds of cloth and a hank of hair.

A few more frames and then putty was moulded piece by piece to the skull and bones to look like decaying flesh. The final sequence took a total of 20 takes, but lasted for just over a minute of screen time. It remains a dramatic and fitting end to a memorable movie.



After his success in *Dracula*, Lee was chosen to play the title role in *The Mummy*, an atmospheric chiller loosely based on the Karloff vehicle of 1932.

As Kharis, guardian of the Princess Anunka, Lee was required to seek out and destroy the three archaeologist who discovered her tomb.

Peter Cushing played the third member of the expedition, and was to encounter the mummy for the first time after it had reduced his front door to splinters.

Cushing remembers that the door Lee was to burst through had been locked in error. 'Poor Christopher nearly knocked himself out going through it,' he recalls. 'I think he actually dislocated his shoulder.'

Audiences flocked to see *The Mummy* in droves and it led to a number of enjoyable but largely undistinguished sequels.

By this time Hammer was acknowledged as the natural successor

to Universal (which, ironically, had become one of its distributors). As such, it was given remake rights to many of the classic creature features produced by Universal and other prestigious American studios during the '30s and '40s.

Although Cushing and everyone at Hammer viewed their films as 'nothing more than rather grim fairy tales', many critics condemned the studio for what they considered to be gratuitous violence.

Ironically, Cushing does not enjoy horror movies himself but has always understood their appeal. 'Hammer was simply entertaining people. It was like a ride on a rollercoaster, nothing more harmful than that.'

'People all over the world enjoy the basic human feeling of fear, yet it's a cosy fear, because you know it cannot happen. These were fantasies, pure and simple. Our brand of horror was just good fun.'

By the mid '60s, Hammer's ►

Christopher Lee — an obvious choice to play the aristocratic Count Dracula.



More thrills from the house of horror — ideal viewing for those dark winter nights...

dominance of the genre was being challenged by more violent examples from the continent. In an effort to regain its lead, the company began to produce a series of double bills. The first of these was *The Gorgon*, coupled with *Curse Of The Mummy's Tomb*. The former marked Barbara Shelley's Hammer debut, and featured the first Cushing/Lee confrontation since *The Mummy*.

In 1966, Christopher Lee appeared as *Rasputin The Mad Monk* on a double bill with *The Reptile*, which had Jacqueline Pearce as a snake woman on the rampage in Cornwall.

Keen-eyed punters were quick to spot the village from the latter reappear as the main set for the influential *Plague Of The Zombies* (1966), and *Rasputin's* Russian palace double for *Castle Dracula* in *Prince Of Darkness*, another production from 1966.

A new name behind the camera in the late '60s was Roy Ward Baker, who came to Hammer to direct *Quatermass And The Pit* in 1967, but who didn't get his teeth into anything substantial until 1970 with *The Vampire Lovers*, the first in a trilogy of tales based around the lesbian vampire Camilla Karnstein created by Sheridan Le Fanu.

The Vampire Lovers, its sequel *Lust For A Vampire* (1971) and prequel *Twins Of Evil* (1971) dwelt on the 'unnatural desires' of the buxom corpse, whose libido had obviously not diminished with the passing of centuries! Ingrid Pitt was suitably seductive in the first film until decapitated by Peter Cushing.

Yutte Stensgaard revived the role in *Lust For A Vampire*, fooling all but her devil worshipping teacher Ralph Bates as she ravaged the pupils of an exclusive girls finishing school. Her spirit took on earthly form for the last time in *Twins Of Evil*, though the story really centred on two identical sisters and their witch-finding puritan uncle (Peter Cushing).

Avengers director John Hough ensured the latter nipped along at a steady pace while still preserving the rich period atmosphere associated with the best of Hammer's costume dramas.

With all its expertise and resources, Hammer was never able to produce a definitive version of Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll And Mr. Hyde*, but in *Dr. Jekyll And Sister Hyde*

(1971), it came pretty close.

To the discriminating viewer, it was rather a hotchpotch of incongruous elements of which the bodysnatchers Burke and Hare were the most obvious. The fact that the two operated exclusively north of the border didn't seem to worry scenarist Brian Clemens or director Roy Ward who set their story in the fogbound alleys of Whitechapel.

The young Ralph Bates had been groomed by Hammer as successor to Peter Cushing. Having proved his worth in the 1970 productions *Taste The Blood Of Dracula* and *Horror Of Frankenstein*, he was given the part of Dr. Jekyll.

Experimenting with female hormones supplied by Burke and Hare, he transforms himself into the predatory Sister Hyde (Martine Beswick) and, as such, sets about the prostitutes of the East End, Ripper-style. It concluded a year in which the studio reached the peak of its output with no less than 10 films on release.

However, the end was already in sight. *Vampire Circus* (1972) was the last major feature of any note to emerge from Hammer. Lalla Ward (Baker) appeared as a female vampire who was able to transform herself into a bat or large animal at will.

In 1974, the financial climate became prohibitive to the production of independent film-making, and Hammer made a last desperate bid to postpone the inevitable with *The Legend Of The Seven Golden Vampires*, a co-production with The Shaw Brothers, a company specialising in kung-fu films. The result was a patchy exploitation movie.

Hammer's final fling came with *To The Devil A Daughter* (1976), adapted from Dennis Wheatley's novel. In an effort to duplicate the sensations of *The Exorcist*, director Peter Sykes had babies bursting out of their mothers' wombs *Alien*-like.

Although the old sets are now dismantled and the cast and crew dispersed, Hammer continues to chill the blood with its video legacy and the occasional *Hammer House Of Horror* TV thrillers.

Summing up his time with Hammer and the continuing appeal of the films he made, Peter Cushing concludes: 'Hammer had a wonderful family atmosphere. Everyone who worked there felt that and gave of their best. There was a real feeling of achievement. There were so many talented people in front and behind the camera and they did so much with limited resources.'

'I think people, young people particularly, need the sort of escapism and mild thrills which Hammer provided and as long as they do so, Hammer's horrors will remain popular' ○

HAMMER ON VIDEO

Twins Of Evil (Rank)
Taste The Blood Of Dracula (Warner Home Video)
Dracula Has Risen From The Grave (Warner Home Video)
Vampire Circus (Video Collection)
Lust For A Vampire (Warner Home Video)
Dr. Jekyll And Sister Hyde (Warner Home Video)
The Curse Of Frankenstein (Warner Home Video)
The Satanic Rites Of Dracula (Warner Home Video)
Dracula AD 1972 (Warner Home Video)
Countess Dracula (Video Collection)
Phantom Of The Opera (RCA/Columbia)
Plague Of The Zombies (RCA/Columbia)